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ABSTRACT

The birth of the two-year colleges created a demand for teachers which was filled largely by instructors from the high schools and by people fresh from graduate school. Teaching methods were shaped in large part by the needs of the students. Techniques were used before there were phrases to identify them or theory to explain them. The student population of the two-year colleges has remained diverse. In the future, those teaching writing in the two-year institutions must become more vocal, demanding more money, better working conditions, and more full-time teachers. As technology continues to evolve, the two-year colleges must keep pace. Faculty at the two-year institutions should not rely on those at the four-year colleges to develop theory. Bright, enthusiastic students should be encouraged to enter the two-year college teaching field. There must be more preparation for teaching in the two-year institutions, through emphasis on basic writing and reading skills, ethnic diversity, business and technical writing, etc. While two-year colleges enroll over half of all first-time freshmen each fall, the institutions still lack the influence they should have in the educational establishment. (SG)

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Twenty-Five Years of Two-Year College English

As we mark the twenty-fifth birthday of the two-year college regionals, it's time to reflect on the past quarter century of two-year college English teaching. In reflecting, I will make some observations about us as teachers, about our students, and our accomplishments, then suggest what the future may hold. I want to do some celebrating, some anticipating, and maybe even a little agitating.

The Faculty

Who were we twenty-five years ago as teachers? The vast growth of the two-year college system nationwide created a sudden and unprecedented demand for people to staff the new institutions. When the boom started in the 1960's, some teachers with master's degrees came from high schools where they had previously taught. More often than not, they were the best high school teachers. Others came fresh from graduate schools. Some found leaving graduate study for full-time teaching in two-year colleges preferable to the jungles of Southeast Asia; some saw it as an alternative to high school teaching; some thought it a way station until they could return to complete a doctorate and move on to university teaching. As time passed, and the job situation changed, many who had wanted to continue doctoral studies, rather than give up a full-time job to return to school,

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remained in the two-year college. Some who received doctoral degrees turned to two-year colleges for employment in the Seventies when positions at four-year colleges and universities became impossible to find. However we got there, most of us found a home on the two-year campus.

Whatever our backgrounds, we had to make ourselves into two-year college teachers. Little we had experienced previously in teaching, little in our educational experiences prepared us for what we would find in the two-year college classroom. Initially, we found the largest intermixture of students in history: the average 18 year old high school graduate and typical college freshman; the open admissions student never before considered "college material," the adult student returning to complete an interrupted education, ex-GI's using their veteran's benefits, and the high school drop-out and recent GED recipient.

How did we ever teach this hodgepodge? Which graduate course, "Middle English Literature Exclusive of Chaucer," "Studies in Victorian Poetry," or "Faulkner Seminar" did we draw upon to meet the needs of this amalgam of students, many of whom could not write a complete sentence or never read a novel in their lives?

The answer, of course, is that we drew upon all our experiences, improvised and experimented and learned over and over again from trial and error--lots of error. From our ranks emerged voices that helped show the way--Lionel Sharp, Ruth Shaw, Elizabeth McPherson, Dick Friedrich,

Gregory Cowan, Elizabeth Cowan Neeld, Lynn Troyka, Harvey Wiener, Nell Ann Pickett, Ann Laster, Audrey Roth, Dee Brock, Don Tighe, Bill Doster, Ira Shor, Dick Worthen--they and hundreds of others shared their experiences with us through professional articles, in new textbooks, and at national and regional conferences. They helped us deal with the under prepared, teach literature in new ways, learn about the writing process, the research paper, technical and business writing, and introduce non-print media into our teaching. We took what these teachers shared with us and adapted it and expanded it in thousands of classrooms across the country.

Mostly, our students shaped us over the past twenty-five years. In the beginning, they were primarily transfer students headed to four-year universities or technical students seeking a terminal degree. Their diversity compelled us to become the most diverse of faculties. We taught adult students and educationally and financially disadvantaged students. We taught students who did not have education as their first priority, those who rushed from our classrooms to part-time or full-time jobs. We learned to deal with these students and their special problems. We became more tolerant, more innovative, and often more frustrated than our high school or four-year colleagues. Rather than remain frustrated, we met the special challenges these students presented with new programs, new approaches, new techniques and exercises, new textbooks, and new cur-

ricula. Out of necessity, we learned new teaching strategies and new methods of delivery.

Our students forced us, for example, to develop basic writing methodology. Students with weaknesses in basic skills have been an ever-present reality, and we have experimented vastly to give open admissions students access to higher education. We pioneered in developmental writing centers and in writing labs--first, for basic writing students and, later, for any and all writing students. We have been at the forefront of assessment efforts. Twenty-five years ago the open-door concept was novel and frightening to many of us. Today it is standard policy, and we accept it without question. We still admit students with substantial academic deficiencies, but we probably do more than any other segment of education to improve basic literacy skills. We also learned about and developed courses and materials for technical writing and business writing. We found, as well, alternatives to the lecture and ways to apply non-print media to all that we did.

Many of us used student groups in composition classes long before doing so was called "collaborative" or "social." We early on discovered that teaching grammar was not teaching writing, and we developed exercises to help students discover ideas long before we heard the term "heuristics" or the phrases "idea generation," "discovery techniques," or "invention activities."

We learned the importance of the visual as an aid to learning, and that it was important to present material in a variety of ways, long before we learned about "cognitive mapping" and "diversity of learning styles." We quickly discovered that students who could not read could not write and that reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills were closely linked.

We had the practice in two-year college classrooms across this country long before we had the theory. In a few instances, we developed the theory ourselves. In others, we left theorizing to our colleagues in the universities with their one or two courses a semester to teach. They gave us theoretical descriptions of the writing process, of collaboration, of social cognition, of response theory, of error analysis, of coherence and cohesion, of discourse communities, of holistic scoring, and many others, while we taught 15-20 contact hours and often over a hundred composition students each week. It has surprised us how much theory has been developed around all of our practical experimentation. It it has not surprised us how much theory has confirmed our practice.

The Students

On the surface, our student population has not changed a great deal over the past quarter century. We still have the eighteen year old college freshman, the one or two-year technical student, and a variety of adult students. We have

more adults than twenty-five years ago, though, many of whom are re-cycling their lives and changing careers. At my college, a student in the first class I taught, back in 1969, completed a two-year associate degree in 1971 and then went to work in his father's small iron works operation. When his father died a few years ago, he inherited the business and continued it until a year ago when competition from larger out-of-state operations and foreign imports forced him out of business. At age 36, the married father of two daughters, he has re-enrolled at my college in the nursing program. It won't surprise you that twenty years ago he was barely a C student. Today he's an honor student.

We may or may not have been actively involved in the feminist movement, but all of us have taught our share of adult women. We know their fear in returning to school, their problems with child care, their distress in dealing with spouses opposed to their education, their sacrifices as single parents. We have seen adult women flock into our classrooms both because of new job opportunities and because of financial necessity which has made practically every household with two parents a two-wage-earner household.

We have taught shift workers and all kinds of workers with beepers on their belts. We've taught 17 and 18 year-old married students with children; 17 and 18 year-old single parents; students suffering through divorces; students abused by parents; adult women abused by husbands

or boy friends; drug addicts and anorexics; students from single parent homes; students living in homes with step-parents and step brothers and sisters from one or more marriages; and students with every conceivable personal problem. We have taught in college classrooms and community centers, in office parks and warehouses, in factories and prisons, in hospitals and shopping malls. And we've taught from 6 a.m. in the morning until 11 p.m. at night, every day and every night, including Saturdays and Sundays.

We have witnessed over the past twenty-five years the cultural changes in society reflected by the students in our classrooms. We felt the frustrations of returning Vietnam veterans--our classes were loaded with them, more than any other segment of American education. We sensed their resentment at a system which sent them to the jungles of Southeast Asia because they were high school dropouts. We saw them return from those jungles, some with physical disabilities, to collect their GI educational benefits. Some came to us for the money alone, but most came back matured by their experiences desiring an education. Many became excellent students and surprised both themselves and us with the powers of their minds.

Likewise, our institutions have been the only passage-ways for record numbers of minority students into the higher education mainstream. All of us have anguished over those students, handicapped through no fault of their own, by their lack of basic skills in reading and writing. At the

same time, we have rejoiced with many of those students as they acquired the necessary skills in our classrooms and went on not only to receive baccalaureate degrees but to graduate with honors from top professional schools.

In teaching these students, most of us have been forced to become "expert generalists." We have been called on to teach every level of composition from basic writing to advanced writing; many of us have taught technical writing, business writing, and creative writing; we have taught a wide variety of literature courses, ranging from British and American to World to specialized courses in feminist literature, African-American literature, regional literature, folklore, or mythology. Many of us have taught reading or study skills courses; some routinely teach speech or journalism, ESL courses or library orientation. As a result of these vast and varied experiences, the majority of us are, indeed, "expert generalists."

Our students with their varied backgrounds--ethnic, racial, cultural--and their vast differences in academic skills and educational objectives forced us to develop as two-year college teachers. They have challenged us and molded us and made us what we are. Our experiences are broader and richer than those of most teachers at any other level of education. We have adapted and changed, and most importantly, we have learned from doing. Yes, we made ourselves into two-year college teachers; we were pioneers, and now we are the first generation of such teachers.

Things have never been easy for us, and they may be more difficult today than ever before. Twenty-one years ago when I first started teaching, I was much more like the students I taught than I am today. Sure, there's the normal age-generation gap that widens each year as I get further from age 18. But I refer to the difference in values and in attitudes toward education. For me, the most difficult phenomenon is the decline in the importance of education in my students' lives. When I started teaching in 1969, education was still important to students; it was a top priority in the lives of most 18 year olds. Today, making money is the number one priority for most. Education seems to fall further down the list of priorities for students each year. Automobiles, clothes, music, fun, and acquiring the money to attain them, interest our students far more than education. Recently, "Today Show" host Bryant Gumbel interviewed a group of high school seniors, winners in a national science competition. He asked one senior if he had any suggestions to make education more appealing to students. The young man's reply was to have more contests like the one he had just won--with money as the prize. This was one of America's top academic high school students; his answer to the education problems in this country: cash incentives to perform. These changes in values and attitudes have made teaching at all levels more difficult than when most of us first started.

The Future

So where do we go from here? We will find our way as we always have. We have spent a great deal of time swimming so we wouldn't sink over the past twenty-five years. I am confident that we have a great deal of buoyancy left. Again, we must focus attention on what we do and how we do it. We must become more vocal and not simply expect more of the same. We must demand better working conditions, smaller and fewer classes, more full-time and fewer part-time teachers on staff. Whatever it takes, we cannot become complacent. Much is right about the past twenty-five years, but much remains wrong: too many classes to teach, too little money, too many part-time teachers; and too many weak administrators of narrow vision. Only we can demand and effect the changes. Only we can implement the 4 C's Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing. Only we can band together and refuse to allow more than twenty students in writing classes.

"Cultural diversity" seems the educational concern of the Nineties. Most of us in two-year colleges have been dealing with cultural diversity for many years. Teachers in large urban community colleges have had vast experiences with students from many cultural backgrounds. Some have been involved in extensive ESL programs. In this area alone, we have the expertise to provide solutions to many problems as our population continues to become more diverse. The influx of multi-cultural students will only increase.

We must find ways to meet their needs as we have always done. For one thing, we must expand the ethnic representation on our faculties.

We cannot predict all the changes to come in technology. In the past twenty-five years, we have witnessed the vast influence of television and video on our students. As a child, did you ever dream of being able to plug into your TV set a favorite recent movie and watch it over and over again in your home, much less watch six or eight movies of your choice at home in one weekend? Our students take this for granted. If video appeals so to 18 year olds, we had better learn to use it more effectively in education.

The computer is with us, and many students know as much or more about it than we do. We must learn, if we do not already know, about computers. If this and future generations find sitting at a keyboard and a screen appealing, we have to find ways to capture that interest. Electronic mail and fax machines are now routine. In the future the delivery systems will change even more. Teachers and textbooks will have to change because they will not be the primary methods for delivering information to students. Soon, we will be able to compose textbooks at will by selecting from data bases whatever materials we want in a book and combining them in our own personal ways. Most of us have never met the perfect textbook; in the future all of us can become composers of texts to suit personal needs. As alternatives to textbooks, we will be able to enliven class

discussions with self-composed laser discs played on video screens, easily bringing into the classroom Vietnam War footage, National Gallery artwork, or scenes from the latest National Geographic special. Recently, a voice activated typing system which allows spoken words to be printed on a video screen has been introduced. Technology will offer us these options and many more not yet envisioned before most of us leave the classroom.

Professional Concerns

I have so far painted a pretty rosy picture, and that's because I feel good about the past twenty-five years of two-year college English. We have accomplished a great deal, as past issues of Teaching English in the Two-Year College give evidence.

However, we do have problems that need attention during the next twenty-five years. As mentioned earlier, too often we have allowed our colleagues in four-year schools to develop theory for us. More of us should engage in research and share our findings through professional writing. We need to assume leadership roles in the profession, to step forward and demonstrate our expertise more publicly. Some of our colleagues never attend professional meetings, are not members of professional organizations, do not subscribe to, much less ever read, our journals. Some other colleagues, the "hyper professionals," are so busy attending professional meetings, writing articles or textbooks, or

consulting all over the place that they seldom teach. Others teach every available overload course within a hundred mile radius of their campuses (can anyone possibly teach seven composition classes?). Some members of our departments profess to teach writing but never write. Some complain constantly about their students' weaknesses, both academic and social, but never take time to listen to or talk with their students. Some merely entertain themselves or merely entertain students and call it teaching. Others spend most of their non-class time socializing with deans and department heads and have little time for their colleagues or their students. We must motivate all these faculty members to become more professional. We must not tolerate less than the best in ourselves or our colleagues.

More importantly, we must be concerned about the next generation of two-year college teachers. If predictions are true of shortages to come in college teaching within the next decade, we must care about those who will replace us when we move on. We need to encourage bright and enthusiastic students to enter the two-year college teaching field. We can do this by sharing the joys and rewards of what we do and by continuing to improve the conditions of our work.

This raises the question of where our future faculties will receive the training they need. Where, indeed, can they receive appropriate graduate-level training for teaching in the two-year college today? Graduate English departments have not been very responsive to the needs of

two-year college faculties. More have added courses in teaching composition, in rhetorical theory, and the history of rhetoric, but not enough have designed curricula which prepare teachers to teach basic writing and reading skills, to handle the ethnic diversity in our classes, to teach the adult learner, to find new ways of teaching literature to non-readers, or to teach business and technical writing--all everyday realities in our colleges. We need to demand that graduate schools institute courses to address these needs and even programs that require internships at two-year colleges before degrees are awarded. We teach the greatest number of freshman and sophomore students in the nation in writing and literature courses. And yet, far too many graduate schools teach too much that is of little use to two-year college teachers. We must communicate to the graduate schools the kinds of preparation two-year college teachers of English need.

At the same time, we ourselves must keep abreast of new developments in our discipline. Much that is new in rhetorical theory and literary theory is relevant to what we do. We ourselves, however, may have to make it relevant. We need to examine constantly the new research in our discipline and make the practical applications to our daily work. And when we do, when we have successes, we must communicate those successes in writing and at conferences. We must become a significant professional voice.

We must continue to find opportunities to convene and share experiences among ourselves and with others at the regional conferences and other professional meetings. Two-year colleges now enroll nearly fifty-five percent of all first-time freshmen each fall. Higher education has been available in this country for 350 years. In only two decades, two-year colleges have captured over half the higher education market. From a business viewpoint, that statistic is phenomenal (Doucette 12). As such a major segment of the educational community, however, we are still not the force we should be in professional organizations or in the educational establishment nationwide. The fault is mostly ours.

The apprenticeship is over; we have become two-year college teachers--mature and sophisticated professionals. We must assume professional responsibilities as we continue to develop our potential to the fullest. Let us celebrate our coming of age; let us anticipate the promising future.

Works Cited

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